

CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
MEETING OF THE BOARD OF HEALTH

Wednesday, May 7, 2025

The Philadelphia Board of Health held a public meeting on Wednesday, May 7, 2025. The meeting was held virtually using the Zoom platform to facilitate access by the public via computer or other device and toll-free phone number.

Board Members Present

Dr. Palak Raval-Nelson, Dr. Marla Gold, Dr. Scott McNeal, Dr. Ana Diez-Roux, Dr. Usama Bilal

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Health Commissioner and Board President Palak Raval-Nelson, PhD, MPH called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. and noted that the Board of Health intends to begin meeting regularly and welcomed those present.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES FROM MEETING ON 2.13.2025

Dr. Raval-Nelson asked if the Board had reviewed the minutes from the public meeting on February 13, 2025. Dr. Raval-Nelson asked if there were any questions about the meeting minutes. There were none. Dr. Raval-Nelson requested a motion to approve the minutes. Dr. Gold moved and Dr. McNeal seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT EXPLANATION

Mr. Ben Hartung of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) reviewed the public comment process and provided notice that this meeting is being recorded and will be posted publicly on the department's YouTube channel.

MEETING AGENDA

Dr. Raval-Nelson described the one agenda item for the meeting, a proposed Rescission of the Philadelphia Board of Health's "Emergency Regulation Governing the Control and Prevention of COVID-19 Mandating Vaccines For Healthcare Workers and in Higher Education, Healthcare, and Related Settings." Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that Dr. Shara Epstein will present on the proposal, then there will be discussion and questions from Board Members, review of any public comment, and a vote by the Board Members.

Dr. Raval-Nelson asked if there were any questions about the agenda. There were none.

PRESENTATION BY DR. SHARA EPSTEIN

Dr. Epstein thanked the Board for the opportunity to present. Dr Epstein provided an overview of her presentation, which included a review of the timeline of COVID-19, the current Board of Health COVID-19 vaccine requirement, COVID-19 vaccine efficacy, current COVID-19 epidemiology, and a discussion of the proposed rescission of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

Dr. Epstein reviewed the historical timeline of the Philadelphia Board of Health's COVID-19 Regulation for Healthcare Workers and in Higher Education, Healthcare, and Related Settings ("the Regulation"). On August 16, 2021, the Board of Health passed a requirement for Healthcare Personnel and Covered Higher Education Individuals to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Philadelphia was facing a large COVID-19 wave at this point, with a "substantial" rate of 54 cases per 100,000 people per day. There were many COVID-19 outbreaks among healthcare workers and the COVID-19 rate continued to climb into the winter. To date there had been 17,000 hospitalizations and 3,800 COVID-19 deaths in Philadelphia.

On August 4, 2022, the Board of Health passed amendments to the Regulation to relax some of the vaccination requirements for higher education institutions. Then on October 13, 2022, the Regulation was amended again to exempt some healthcare workers from the vaccination requirement. During the winter of 2022, there were significant numbers of cases, but with less severity because people had access to primary series vaccines. On March 9, 2023, the Higher Education Vaccination Requirement portion of the Regulation was rescinded because there was less severity of COVID-19 disease among younger people. Soon afterwards, the emergency declaration regarding COVID-19 ended. Many jurisdictions removed vaccination requirements at this time. In Philadelphia, PDPH and the Board of Health decided to wait to rescind the Healthcare Worker Requirement until sustained decreases in infection rates were seen and to make sure there would be no negative effects on healthcare workers.

Dr. Epstein reviewed the elements of the current healthcare worker vaccination requirement of the Regulation. Dr. Epstein noted that PDPH does not require any other vaccinations for healthcare workers, but that PDPH supports institutions who have such requirements, like the flu vaccine, for healthcare workers. PDPH supports institutions that may decide to continue to require COVID-19 vaccination for healthcare workers. The current COVID-19 vaccination requirement for healthcare workers has not changed since the initial passage of the Regulation. Healthcare workers must be "fully vaccinated," which they can achieve in several ways. They can complete: two doses in an initial two-dose monovalent mRNA COVID-19 vaccination series (Moderna or Pfizer); or a single dose in an initial one-dose COVID-19 vaccination approved the FDA (Janssen); or one updated 2023-2024 mRNA COVID-19 vaccine dose; or an updated 2024-2025 mRNA dose for an individual who has not had any previous vaccination; or two doses in an initial two-dose Novavax COVID-19 series; or a single dose of any updated vaccine. Since there were no initial dose regimens available after Fall 2023, the requirement was updated to allow single doses of an updated vaccine. There is no requirement to have received any updated vaccines beyond the initial required dose. This means that someone could have been vaccinated in 2020 or 2021 and still meet the vaccination requirement today.

Dr. Epstein reviewed the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. She showed a slide from the recent CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) presentation by Dr. Fiona Havers that discussed the efficacy of the 2024-2025 COVID-19 vaccination against hospitalization among immunocompetent adults aged 65 or older. The slide summarized the VISION and IVY Network studies. Dr. Epstein noted that vaccine efficacy was in the 40-50 percent range. There were slight differences based on the length of time since vaccination, but the studies importantly show that having updated vaccination prevents hospitalization and death. The vaccine helps protect people at risk of severe disease. Dr. Epstein compared the current-year flu vaccine efficacy rate for children and adults, which was similar at around 40-50 percent at preventing hospitalization.

Dr. Epstein reviewed a slide on the effectiveness of the 2024-2025 COVID-19 vaccination against hospitalization among immunocompromised adults over 65, which importantly showed a 40 percent effectiveness rate against hospitalization. Dr. Epstein notes that this data shows that people have ways to protect themselves from COVID-19.

Dr. Epstein reviewed a slide that showed COVID-19 seroprevalence from January to March 2023. This data showed that community immunity nationwide was more than 97 percent across all demographics (age, sex, race/ethnicity). These seroprevalence rates reflected a combination of vaccination, infection, or both. Most of the cases were from both. When the Regulation requiring healthcare worker vaccination was passed in 2021 immunization and previous vaccination rates were low. Many people had not been vaccinated and healthcare systems were being overwhelmed by patients. Given these facts, Dr. Epstein noted it was important for the Board of Health to pass the Regulation in 2021.

Dr. Epstein reviewed a slide with epidemiological surveillance graphs that showed counts of COVID-19 hospitalizations by age by month of the pandemic. Dr. Epstein noted on the graph the time when the Institutions of Higher Education were removed from the Regulation. The hospitalization rate has dropped over time, but people are still being hospitalized and PDPH still works on COVID-19 prevention every day. Last winter's surge was the lowest on record with the latest summer surge being slightly higher than the winter infection rate. We are still seeing lower infection rates in comparison to earlier in the pandemic.

Dr. Epstein reviewed a slide with epidemiological surveillance graphs that showed counts of monthly COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population by age by month of the pandemic. Unfortunately, people continue to die from COVID-19 and the disease should not be taken lightly. There are, however, much lower death rates in 2025 than we have seen in any other part of the pandemic.

Dr. Epstein summarized her presentation by noting that the overall picture of COVID-19 is different now. Rates of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths have decreased. Our current winter peak was lower than any previous winter or summer peak. Almost everyone has been exposed by infection or vaccination at this point in the pandemic.

Dr. Epstein reviewed PDPH recommendations that will continue if the Board of Health votes to rescind the Regulation. PDPH recommends all Philadelphians stay up to date with COVID-19

vaccination. PDPH encourages healthcare workers and patients to mask in times of increased respiratory disease transmission to reduce the likelihood of infectious disease transmission. PDPH recommends that healthcare institutions enforce existing protocols to protect healthcare workers and patients from infectious disease transmission.

Dr. Epstein finished her presentation with a request for questions and discussion from Board Members about the proposed rescission of the Regulation.

Dr. Raval-Nelson thanked Dr. Epstein for her presentation and asked Mr. Hartung to display the proposed rescission language. Dr. Raval-Nelson asked the Board Members to review the language and then proceed with any discussion.

Mr. Hartung read the language of the proposed rescission of the Regulation aloud and explained that the rescission encompasses all elements of the Regulation as it has existed. Dr. Raval-Nelson asked for clarification about whether the previous amendments to the regulation were also being rescinded. Mr. Hartung explained that earlier amendments to Regulation had already been in effect but noted that all amendments were being listed in this rescission for purposes of clarity about the scope of this rescission.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION FROM BOARD MEMBERS

Dr. Ismail stated his support for the rescission of the Regulation, noting the risk to benefit ratio in higher education as rationale. It is a lot of work to get over 1,000 people vaccinated at his institution. The benefit is going to be lower now than it was back in 2022-2023. He would prefer to leave it to individuals to get vaccinated, rather than require institutions to document their required vaccination.

Dr. Diez-Roux stated that it is important that we communicate clearly about why we are rescinding the Regulation. It is not because we do not believe in vaccine anymore. It is because the situation has changed. Dr. Diez-Roux asked if this rationale should be part of the language of the rescission of the Regulation or if it could be communicated in a different way. Dr. Raval-Nelson responded that PDPH continues to support vaccination. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that PDPH's Communications Director, Jim Garrow, will be working to make sure that that message is delivered along with the rescission. The communication strategy should be based on the statements of the Board Members and the continuing stance of PDPH in support of vaccinations.

Dr. Gold stated her support for rescission of the Regulation and supported Dr. Diez-Roux's comments on the importance of the content and context of our communications as public health officials. Dr. Gold noted two purposes for the original mandates: (1) to protect healthcare workers and to allow them to stay on the job and (2) to protect patients that might be exposed to COVID-19 during interactions with healthcare providers. Dr. Gold thanked Dr. Epstein for her presentation and asked if there were any studies that show the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine in preventing transmission among vaccinated individuals. Dr. Epstein noted that she had done a literature review in preparation for the meeting and found studies looking at household transmission among vaccinated individuals and COVID-19 transmission in confinement facilities among vaccinated individuals. The results differ based on the study, but there was not strong

evidence. These settings are different than healthcare settings in that healthcare setting interactions are temporary and involve more layers of protection. Dr. Gold noted that masking and ventilation are essential for prevention of COVID-19 transmission.

Dr. McNeal thanked Dr. Epstein for her presentation and thanked Dr. Raval-Nelson for championing this issue. Dr. McNeal asked whether the Regulation would be immediately rescinded or would it need to go through the 30-day comment period. Mr. Hartung responded that the Regulation would need to go through the 30-day comment period because the emergency declaration is no longer effective.

Dr. Bilal thanked Dr. Epstein for her presentation. Dr. Bilal noted that we now know more about the transmission process than we did at the time the Regulation was first passed. Dr. Bilal noted that the first Pfizer trial had 95 percent effectiveness against symptomatic infection. This was likely conflated with 95 percent effectiveness of prevention of transmission in earlier stages of the pandemic. We now know that the main impact of the vaccine is preventing severe disease. This makes it harder to support the Regulation's vaccine mandate and makes it less likely the public will support a mandate.

PUBLIC COMMENT

A member of the public commented about an outbreak of pneumonia at Philly ACCT, which is the only open public intake shelter for animals in the entire city. ACCT operates on a small budget of \$4.3 million per year. The shelter takes in 18,000 animals a year, including from dog fighting rings, negligent owners, and criminal cases. In comparison San Diego County has a budget of \$42 million and they take in the same number of animals each year. The intake center is located in North Philadelphia. Healthy animals are being euthanized because of this outbreak. They would be adopted, but they cannot be now. Canine pneumonia develops from kennel cough, which shows that ACCT does not have enough resources for disease prevention. The public commenter asked the Board to review the "Clean and Green" budget initiative to help get the shelter cleaned from top to bottom. They also asked that the Board work with the Pennsylvania Department of State regarding medical licensure in Philadelphia. The commenter stated that there are doctors that have killed patients in Philadelphia by neglect, including at University of Pennsylvania Hospital.

Dr. Gold asked if Board should take up the pneumonia outbreak as an issue. The Board of Health members had not heard of this issue before. She asked Dr. Raval-Nelson about the purview of the Board regarding veterinary transmission of disease. Dr. Gold stated that she believes strongly in "one health" principles but would need to learn more about jurisdiction. Dr. Gold also stated that she has not decided to visit or not visit shelters based on their location in Philadelphia.

Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that ACCT used to be under the purview of PDPH, but that it has not been since 2010. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that animal health is important and we will make connections with the proper authorities. If there is something that the Board needs to address, then it will be raised at the August meeting.

VOTE OF BOARD MEMBERS

Dr. Gold moved to vote to approve the proposed Rescission of the Philadelphia Board of Health's "Emergency Regulation Governing the Control and Prevention of COVID-19 Mandating Vaccines For Healthcare Workers and in Higher Education, Healthcare, and Related Settings." Dr. McNeal seconded. The Rescission of the Philadelphia Board of Health's "Emergency Regulation Governing the Control and Prevention of COVID-19 Mandating Vaccines For Healthcare Workers and in Higher Education, Healthcare, and Related Settings" was passed unanimously without abstentions.

FINAL COMMENTS

Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that next public meeting will be in August and that Division Directors are invited to attend. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that a likely agenda item will be a regulation to regulate mobile medical providers based on City Council legislation. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted it will be like the outdoor feeding regulations.

Dr. Gold noted that she would prefer that regulations of the Board of Health start with their input because they would like a chance to consult as experts on topics of interest to City Council that pertain to public health. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the proposed City Council legislation states that the Board of Health will promulgate regulations, which will allow PDPH and the Board to craft the needed regulations.

Dr. Raval-Nelson asked Ashley Clark to introduce herself as the new CFO Deputy Commissioner of PDPH. Ms. Clark introduced herself to the Board. Dr. Raval-Nelson asked if anyone else had questions or comments. There were none.

ADJOURNMENT

Dr. McNeal motioned to adjourn the meeting. Dr. Gold seconded. Dr. Raval-Nelson adjourned the meeting at 7:17 p.m.